

## Reading 2A

### WHY STUDY THE HOLOCAUST?

Read each question first. Then, have students read the selection, “Why Study the Holocaust?” aloud. Finally, discuss the questions.

#### Questions:

1. How is the Holocaust different from other mass murders or “genocides”?
2. What benefits can be derived from a study of the Holocaust?
3. In light of the comments on the video, what do you think the scholar meant by “After Auschwitz, anything is possible”?

The Holocaust is our legacy—all of us. It is essential that all of us understand what took place during the Holocaust. We live after and, thus, participate in post-Holocaust life. The tragic events presented in this unit of study present one of the darkest periods in the history of the world. The Holocaust is over, but the nature of the society that carried it out exists here and now.

The Holocaust refers to the murder of some six million European Jews from 1933 to 1945. It was not that first state-ordained mass murder or attempted genocide (the annihilation of a people, nation or race.) The first such attempt in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the Armenian Genocide in which 1.5 million Armenians were murdered by the government of Turkey from 1915 to 1922.

The United Nations Convention on Genocide declared, in 1948, that genocide was “an odious scourge which has inflicted great losses on humanity in all periods of history.” Since 1945, since the Holocaust, such policies have been conducted by several countries around the world against various victim peoples. Governments have embarked on courses to “freely exterminate” whole populations. The Pol Pot regime in Cambodia massacred hundreds of thousands of people between 1975 and 1979. During the 1967-1969 Nigerian Civil War, up to one million Ibos were killed in Biafra. In Uganda, between 1972 and 1979, over 75,000 people were slaughtered. Not only were political opponents murdered, but their families were also killed.

Genocide, the extermination of whole populations because of racial, national, ethnic, political or religious differences, has become almost commonplace.

Comparisons to determine which group suffered the worst tragedy serve neither the past nor the present. The uniqueness of the Holocaust, however, invites us to focus specific attention on it and its lessons for modern society. All the hallowed ideas and institutions of Western civilization have had to be reevaluated as a result of the Holocaust. “After Auschwitz,” one scholar has written, “anything is possible.”

From 1922-1945, over 40 million people, two-thirds of whom were civilians, were victims of the Nazis. The initial victims of concentration camps were tens of thousands of

political opponents: Catholics who had opposed Nazism, Socialists and Communists, homosexuals, and Jehovah's Witnesses (for their pacifism). Among the earliest victims were what Nazi doctors called the "feeble minded," the incurably ill, "asocials" or "ugly"—all considered to be "useless" forms of "life unworthy of life." Over 21 million Russians died during World War II, including more than 2 million Russian prisoners of who were starved to death or died of disease or exhaustion. Some of those prisoners were the first victims of experimental gas chambers at Auschwitz. Near the end of the war, when some of the surviving Russian prisoners were marched into one camp, a woman recalled seeing them: "They were beyond belief. They had been totally degraded, turned into animals, starved and beaten down. They were walking skeletons, their eyes looked like the eyes of death itself." Six million (non-Jewish) Poles, between 300,000 and 500,000 Gypsies, over 800,000 French, and millions of Greeks, Hungarians, Yugoslavians, British, Dutch, and other Europeans were murdered. Germans, too, were victims of the Nazis. Yet only against the Jews did the Nazis use a combination of organizational skills, industrial expertise and technological forces. There is little doubt that had World War II continued, the Jews would have been annihilated. The next group to bear the full fury of Nazi murder would probably have been the Poles. They would have been followed by still others. The killings of the Jews would have provided the guidelines and techniques for these subsequent murders.

This unit of study focuses on the murder of the Jews. The Holocaust differs from other genocides in several ways:

- The Holocaust was totally involving. Every realm of an enlightened, industrial society became entangled in murder.
- The Holocaust was not a barbaric undertaking. The killers used the most advanced technical, scientific means available. Places for the killing of millions were called death factories. Assembly-line techniques were adopted. Not only science but even medical science—doctors, surgeons, researchers, whole medical faculties—actively participated.
- Each step leading toward annihilation was approved by legitimate state authorities and was legally carried out by public officials. An elaborate system of human destruction permeated the courts, the diplomatic services, the police, the civil service, state legislatures, and, indeed, all public institutions.
- Most civilians became indifferent to the destruction of their neighbors.

Perhaps, as a result of studying the Holocaust, you will be better able to identify the political, social, and intellectual conditions which led to it. And, equally important, you may better understand how the Holocaust directly affected the lives of specific individuals. This unit may help you to see how the lives of people, some your own age, were and can be disrupted because of indifference and apathy.

By examining the behavior of civilized people, this study takes a painful look at how fragile morality, democracy and the sanctity of human life itself can be. The unit is designed to make us all more aware of our responsibilities to ourselves and others, so

that, as one Holocaust survivor noted, “no such event will happen again, and the future will be safe for our children—for all children.”